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USA graduates flying high into their next life journeys

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The Urban Science Academy, one of the new high schools occupying the West Roxbury Educational Complex, has accomplished a lot since its inception, and no one showcases its success better than this year's crop of graduates.

According to Principal Rasheed Meadows, 90 percent of the students will be going to college next year, and every single student has a post-graduation plan. Collectively, the graduates have received $1.1 million in scholarships for college.

"Not only did they make it, but they made it in a very successful and stylish way," Meadows said to the capacity crowd at graduation.

The happiness and excitement that filled the air during the graduation exercises was the result of a lot of hard work by teachers, administrators, staff members and students.

“Over the last year, we’ve worked hard to build a strong community,” Meadows said. “A lot the kids didn’t know what to expect coming into the school. But on graduation, you could see that they’ve all come to love it.”

As the students crossed the stage and received their diplomas to raucous cheers, chants, screams and applause, this could not have been clearer. Praise for the teachers as they were introduced at the ceremony, though, was just as loud.

“We’d like to congratulate the teachers, administrators and staff members,” said valedictorian Woodger Faugas, who will be going on to Hamilton College next year. “We thank you for your guidance and dedication in forming our dreams into reality.”

David Rollins, a National Honor Society member who will be going to Salem State next year, transferred to USA for his senior year of high school. He said that the past year was one in which he changed a lot.

“It was my humanities teacher that opened me up to new ideas,” Rollins said.

But it was also the small community — which Meadows likened to a family — that led many to feel at home in the new school. Jazmine Green, the senior class secretary who will be going to Fitchburg State College next year, exemplified the openness and warmth among her class in her graduation speech.

"When I started my speech, I was going to say, 'Hi, my name is Jazmine Green and I want to talk about my experiences here,'" she said as she began her talk. "But my teachers told me to be myself. So, whatup class."

The graduates responded with an uproar of cheers.

USA was founded with a focus on science, and provides Advanced Placement chemistry, calculus, biology and environmental science courses. Meadows emphasized that the school has branched out to provide music and drama programs as well. The musicians — many of whom had never picked up an instrument before coming to the school — played a rendition of "Watermelon Man" at the graduation.

The students participated in a variety of community service activities as well this year, including a trip to New Orleans to help rebuild the lower 9th Ward. For Liana Donahue, the senior class co-president who lived in New Orleans until Hurricane Katrina hit, the trip held special significance: she worked to help clean up her old neighborhood.

However, as she extolled her experiences at USA to the graduates — in verse no less — she could not have seemed happier to have come to the new school.

"The comfort of knowing that no one is judging you," said Donahue, who is going to Bryn Mawr College next year. "When you walk into school, no one cares as long as you are genuine."

In the next year, Meadows said that the school hopes to expand its Advanced Placement classes with the addition of English, history, Spanish and psychology courses. The school hopes to add professional development and educational requirements well.

"We're really looking at next year as an opportunity to offer an extended number of internships," Meadows said. "As part of the graduation requirement, students will have to get an internship. Also as a graduation requirement, they will have to apply and be accepted to college, just so they have the option."

Meadows noted that the school has a number of college counselors on staff to help students with the entire process.

USA has high hopes for the coming years, but this year's graduates all seemed content with their experience.

"I wouldn't trade it for the world," Green said.